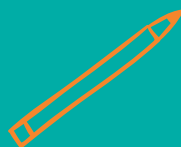


**ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT:
TOWARD BETTER EDUCATION
OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN IN CARE**



October 2017



**REPRESENTATIVE FOR
CHILDREN AND YOUTH**



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

"Education . . . beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer . . . the balance-wheel of the social machinery."

– 19th-century education reformist Horace Mann

Certainly most would agree with the vision that public education, at its essence, should help to level the playing field for children and youth – to provide all young people, no matter their family circumstances or life challenges, with the basic knowledge and tools necessary to thrive.

However, that has not been the general experience for children and youth who find themselves in the care of the British Columbia government. For some time, children and youth in continuing care¹ have realized significantly lower academic achievement in the provincial K to 12 education system than their contemporaries, generally trailing well behind other students on most measures.

The discrepancy in educational achievement is startling. For example, in 2014/15, only 34 per cent of B.C. Grade 7 students in continuing care met or exceeded expectations in numeracy. By comparison, the percentage of all other Grade 7 students who met or exceeded numeracy expectations was more than double that, at nearly 73 per cent.

Major discrepancies between B.C. students in continuing care and those who are not are also borne out when Grade 10 core subject marks are examined. For example, 71 per cent of all other B.C. students had marks of C-plus or better in science in 2014/15, compared to only 39.5 per cent of students in continuing care. The difference between these two groups is nearly as large when it comes to languages and social studies.

Perhaps most glaring are the figures around high school completion and graduation rates. Of B.C. students in continuing care who began Grade 8 in 2009/10, only about 51 per cent graduated within six years. This compares to a nearly 89 per cent graduation rate for all other students in the province.

Such disparities are often exacerbated when the student in continuing care is Indigenous or has a special need. On most measures, the academic achievement of Indigenous children and youth in continuing care is lower than that of non-Indigenous youth in continuing care. Of Indigenous students in continuing care, only

¹ Continuing care refers to children and youth who have a Continuing Custody Order (CCO) that allows the Director under the *Child, Family and Community Service Act (CFCS Act)* to exercise guardianship responsibilities. Other types of custody orders used by MCFD under the *CFCS Act* include Interim and Temporary Custody Orders. Other types of care agreements under the *Act* include Special Needs and Voluntary Care Agreements.

44 per cent graduated within six years of beginning Grade 8, compared to 61 per cent of non-Indigenous students with the same care status. The gap in school completion is similar between students with a special need who are in continuing care (44.2 per cent) and all other students with a special need (67 per cent).

Data in B.C. on the educational achievement of students who are in care is limited because the provincial government tracks only those in continuing care (with a CCO) and does not break out achievement data for students with Temporary or Interim Custody Orders or those on care agreements such as Voluntary Care Agreements or Special Needs Agreements.

The data that is available leaves no doubt that significant gaps persist between outcomes for B.C. students in continuing government care and all other students. Nevertheless, some students in continuing care do manage to buck this troubling trend. About one in seven students in B.C. with a CCO graduated with honours in 2014/15. As this report states, students in continuing care are not naturally "under-performers."

Nevertheless, in many cases, because of their life experiences, these students do need additional supports in order to succeed academically – supports they too often do not receive.

Troubling gaps in the limited education statistics that are available spurred the Representative to examine how outcomes for all children and youth in care – those in continuing care as well as all other forms of government care – can be improved. The pages of this report identify many supports that, when provided, can help children and youth in care to succeed academically, close the gaps, and make education the true equalizer that Mann envisioned.

Helping this review to identify those supports was the participation of more than 1,200 individuals with experience in the school and care systems, including more than 160 youth in and from various forms of care and nearly 500 teachers. Focus groups and a survey conducted by the McCreary Centre Society with the youth in and from care informed the review. So did surveys of more than 1,000 other stakeholders including teachers, principals and vice principals, Aboriginal Education staff, social workers with both the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) and Delegated Aboriginal Agencies (DAAs) and foster parents.

Through this extensive consultation process, as well as a detailed literature review, the Representative has identified six distinct areas in which more help or changes can make a significant difference for all students in care. These areas include:

- **Stability at home and school, and adequate support for when moves are necessary.** As one student told this review: *"I was doing well in school 'til I started being bounced around in foster homes and group homes."*
- **Positive and consistent relationships both at school and home that support education.** *"Youth in care do not get told by their foster parent: 'when you graduate' . . .,"* offered another youth. *"They say 'if' – there's a big difference in treatment there. There's no talk about college."*

- **Help with school work including flexibility, goal-setting, celebrating success and support for special needs.** *"Being able to go at my own pace [has been helpful], as I get overwhelmed quite easily and it takes a lot to get my focus back on track when something sets me off,"* said one student.
- **Adults sharing information and planning together, with the student, for the student's success.** Said one Aboriginal Education worker: *"The capacity for social workers to engage in the educational growth of students is paramount. If social workers were given more resources to meet with teachers and Aboriginal support people, the support of youth in care would be much more rich."*
- **Mental health needs met and help to heal from trauma recognized and addressed.** *"People think youth in care are bad kids, but it's how we're raised,"* said a youth. *"Abuse and moving, etc. all play a role in how someone grows up."*
- **Support for Indigenous students at school, including Indigenous children and youth in care with their own cultures, participation by elders and Indigenous school staff, and cultural content in class.** *"I feel at our school that our Aboriginal students have become increasingly aware of their identity [positive] and that the more we have done to include and engage them in this piece, the more success we are seeing."* – Aboriginal Education staff member.

This report makes six recommendations to address these key areas – most notably calling for the Ministry of Education to allocate specific funding to each school district based on the number of children and youth in care, funding that would be dedicated to supporting the learning of these students.

The report also recommends that the ministry strengthen its accountability to monitor and improve supports for children and youth in care across the province, as well as tracking and reporting out on educational outcomes for these students in care. And it calls on the ministry to place a specific focus on outcomes and supports for Indigenous children in care, a group that is vastly over-represented in B.C.'s child welfare system.

Two recommendations are made to MCFD. The report calls for the ministry to use an evidence-based approach to assess trauma-related needs for all children and youth coming into care and to consistently implement necessary supports for recovery from trauma across all care settings, including schools. It also calls for MCFD to provide authorization to caregivers to be able to sign permission slips for school and other activities, and for any related liability issues that arise due to this change to be addressed.

The report recommends that the Ministry of Education, school districts and MCFD work together to create positions dedicated to information-sharing, coordination and advocacy in support of education outcomes of children and youth in care, both within school districts and between school districts and local MCFD and DAA services for children and youth in care.

Fulfilling this report's recommendations would go a long way toward levelling the educational playing field for children and youth in care. As the prudent parent of these young people, government should aim for no less.